

Did Camberwell Ever Know What Made the Orient's Lure?

The Color of the East

BY JOHN RUSSELL

As Shown in the Gambling Den of Li Chwan in Singapore.

In an upper apartment of a certain house already astir with the evening's regular business—in a very private apartment just above the rear entrance—the gentleman from Macao arrived quite noiselessly, popping between the curtains and startling a wordless cry from the woman who sat waiting for him there, alone.

"A mackerel!" was his announcement, given in the Portuguese-Chinese dialect. "Sweet pony of mine, I have caught one big mackerel at last! Eat as butter. He will be here to-night, and tomorrow—we eat!" he said, with a click of teeth.

The woman quailed before the almost insane flicker in his gaze, the look of that polite, catlike, brilliantly smiling little individual.

She was young enough to have been a girl not so long ago, was still girlish and lovely under the lamplight—slight and dark, with hair and lashes that would have made her envied anywhere, with the rich warmth of skin that shames mere white.

"Somebody for me?" she faltered.

"Somebody for you!" he mimicked, with contained savagery. "No—nobody for you, little flower! Rest easy. This time it is another kind of fool. But you will spare him for me."

"How, then?" He caught her wrist in his small, steady grip.

"Listen! In a little while comes this idiot to play at Li Chwan's tables, inside. You will get the seat next to him, and before he lose all his stake see to it that you coax him in here for a moment. Save your tears for that. Somehow, somehow, you bring him to this room."

"Li Chwan will beat me."

"Li Chwan! Look that doof before he follows; I need but the tenth part of an instant. Tonight is our great good fortune—comprehend that. This stranger has money—much, much money—to be so easily come by. I saw it. In a fat purse. Therefore, attend me well."

"You bring him here. You cajole him with what tale you like. You lead him over by this window."

He swept aside the curtain that covered an exit upon the balcony. "You push him against the hangings, if you can, to make them bulge a little—thus. Ah! ah! I will be ready—not far—hiding just behind. Then you hold him only long enough to give me true aim. . . . Understand?"

She was staring dully past him through the broken bars down, down, at the water below, where his tide lapped the pilings and a vacant ray of light shone signs.

"And you?" she asked, mechanically.

But when she lifted her weary glance she found him already fingering a ten-inch Japanese knife—testing the beautifully polished blade.

"My Deus!" she screamed. "Not that!"

He struck her across the mouth as she fell to her knees. "Be silent, thou! There shall be no evidence at all. None saw me with him. None shall see me. He, a stranger—a chance tourist, without friends—he comes to Li Chwan's to gamble. Next morning the police find him in the bay—Who is he? Who knows? Who cares?"

"I will know!" she gasped. If you drag me into this last infamy!"

"Well?" The gentleman from Macao took hold of her and began interrogatively to probe the soft hollows of her neck—the spot where a dark goes safe home. "Ah-ha!"

"Wouldst betray me—thinkest thou? Couldst keep such treachery in thy heart—thinkest thou?" Pressing with his finger tips smoothly and dexterously behind her ear, of a sudden he brought her groveling.

As she writhed at his feet in agony, swiftly she made a snatch at his armed fist—but he was in his despairing effort to bury the blade in her bosom.

Quite expertly and playfully he hit her between the eyes.

"Sweet honey-flower! Little marigold blossom! I think not, I think not!" he purred—and smiled more brilliantly than ever.

* * *

So, altogether, it might truly be said that attractions and amusements were thoroughly well provided against the visit of Camberwell, that eager young explorer, when he came to the fan-tan den of Li Chwan to continue his inquiry for local color.

Purple and saffron had been Camberwell's first notion of it. He saw it so the day he crossed the equator, that line which always seems, somehow, as if it ought to run the other way—much less of a boundary between north and south than it is between west and east. They cried the news in the smoking room, and he ran out on deck under a stormy sky more than half expecting to find an actual mark ruled straight over the sea, as it had been in his school geography. And, sure enough, under a stormy sky, the sun showed for a moment through the clouds and paved a glorious threshold.

After that he could hardly curb his impatience while the steamer wandered among Antipodean ports—transplanted bits of white man's country where people talked in his own tongue and almost with his own twang. But presently they headed back on a long westerly slant and one morning at dawn they made their landfall. Camberwell stood forward in the bows, and as the mist parted before him he seemed to be flying in through successive opening gates each more wonderful—the first, "jasper"; the second, "sapphire"; the third, "chrysanthemum"; the fourth, an emerald.

And the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. Those flaming old words came to mind—from Revelations, weren't they? It was all one revelation to him, the goal for which he had yearned, a fairy-tale come true—the dazzling, the gorgeous, the varitable east.

Since the earliest time he could remember, Camberwell had been looking to this moment. He was of the type of chap that dreams and that lives in dreams of those strange foreign parts, while destiny holds the balance true with a grip between home and

business twice a day. By ordinary dispensation, he should have gone on dreaming a little more dimly and dingly than the bulge of a bank account or the horse-power of an automobile became the only potent figure in illusion.

But Camberwell had the luck. Before he was too old to care for dreams a certain forgotten aunt left him a very compact little sum in tangible cash.

A month later he had taken the first vessel he could catch for realms of polyphony romance.

She was a cramped and insectivorous craft, but she meant the Argos and the royal yacht and all the caravans of Columbus to Camberwell. She was going to swing the lesser circle of the Pacific, with a few brief stops at obvious ports. But Camberwell asked nothing better; he was on the rainbow route at last.

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THE morning of his arrival, he adorned himself in his new silk suit and his new sun hat, and his buckskin shoes and his washable tie, and the cummerbund he had bought from the barber and the pluguee in the book in the other, he stood armed to sail forth like a modern conquistador the moment the gangway should be lowered.

The colors were there—they were there beyond all whirling! Brown, of course, faces and bodies lemon brown, coffee brown, apricot brown, chocolate brown. Each separate figure leaped to the eye with some radiant spirit—hercules of vermillion, of ocher, of aquamarine; assortied head-dresses in raw magnolia, slate, salmon, robin's egg and grass-green; shirts and ashens in the oddest richness, old rose and olive, apricot and cinnamon; the silver-embroidered cap of a babe, the robe-yellow robe of a sponge, the vehement scarlet belt and badge of a mullein-clad chrysanthemum; bands and whorls, dots and patches of color, as if the whole palette had been wasted abroad with one gigantic spatter-brush. Camberwell went blinking and hurrying through it all, random-footed and random-minded as well.

"I must remember this!" groaned Camberwell, and tried to make sure of it, clicking the mental camera furiously. But the folk swept him on and each vista blotted out the one that went before and made it seem poor and meager and altogether insignificant.

How on earth was a man to remember anything, any one aspect, when another was always shifting, equally surprising and equally true? The best he could do was to clutch his gun belt, the tighter and blink the faster, and mop his bewildered, beaming face in a heat that waxed about him like a steam bath, and go looking on—seeing, still seeing.

A mad sort of pilgrimage, and before evening it had led him the extended round to the bazaar and the fort and the race course. To the Chinese millionaire—an immense carved glove box in cinnabar, lampblack and chrome. To the Mohammedan mosque—a wedding cake of frosty white—and the Hindu temple, to the municipal gardens, where fantastic vegetation from the most expensive hothouses in the world had been recklessly heaped right outdoors to display every tinge, wash, stain, texture or complexion that man ever named, and many more they never would—every blooming color, as Davidon had said.

"How much of it are you going to do?"

"All of it," asserted Camberwell. "You've got only until tomorrow morning."

"I know. But a fellow who's been waiting for a thing twenty-four years can sample a whole lot in twenty-four hours. That's me!"

Davidson considered him.

"And what do you think you're after, sir?"

"Truth," said Camberwell promptly as if nothing could be simpler. "I want the essence of this strange place and these strange people. I want to understand it. I want to grab it for myself. I want—By gum!"

They were fairly in the roadstead now, where the city lay left and right. With its little minarets and pagodas, of spires and domes as various as its faiths, it swam over its own reflection in the flood of the morning, detached, suspended like a mirage—a vision of incredible enchantment that burst upon Camberwell all at once.

"Look!" he cried. "That's it—that's what I came for! I want to get that."

"Yes?" said Davidson, encouraging.

"By George! I knew it was bound to be splendid. But this—just look at the color, Mister Mate!"

"Yes," agreed Davidson, not unapreciative himself. "Yes. When that chap upstairs begins splashing his lights all over the shop he does get some queer effects—no mistake. Though you'd have to keep looking a goodish while to learn the half of his combination."

"Maybe," said Camberwell. "But dyo know," he breathed in hushed enthusiasm. "I believe it's got some combination. What? If a man were only keen enough to catch it—and wouldn't it be great if he could?"

"Something vital and vivid to knock you on the spot so you'd say right off—There, that means the east! And I'm going to try, I'm sure going to try. I'll pass up no chance trying to get at it. Look now! How it seems. * * * You never saw a combination to beat that in your born days!"

Davidson was doing some thinking. "It'll seem something else in five minutes," he observed. "See here, sir, I couldn't go about to warn you at all—you being a passenger. I would not presume." There spoke the professional stiffly. "And, of course, you're keyed up for your first oriental port—natural, too. But after all, you know it's not a thousand and one a huge great city and not over sanitary, neither—" He hesitated, until Camberwell drew him with an amiable nod.

"A city like any other city, really," he went on. "Colors? My word, yes—ever blooming color. Twenty different races in a heap. As far as the truth of 'em—" He shook his head—a wise head, tinged with gray. "You couldn't ever dig it up. And if you did, you wouldn't care for it at all; and likely it'd turn out to be a lie, anyhow."

He appeared to be only some casual merchant, clerk, or agent of the port—with his suit of antique drill and low-brimmed Panama, with his languid glances and pruned moustache, there was nothing to set him apart in the class of resident local whites and superior Eurasians. Camberwell had been vaguely aware of such a class. He even thought for an instant he must have seen this gentleman before, somewhere. The gentleman from Macao had been trailing him half the day, and it would have been very poor business indeed if he had intruded himself so clumsily. A certain experience in these affairs had taught the gentleman from Macao to be neat as a pin, inconspicuous as a cat, smooth and deft always. Which he was, and, except for his smile, completely colorless.

"You don't like?" he queried.

"Why, no; I don't," said Camberwell, readily if somewhat reluctantly.

"The way it comes they certainly put out over on me. I leave it to you. Here I've been running in circles since early morning to discover the special domestic attraction of your burg—and here's the answer I was slipped to me after all. A common, everyday mixed drink."

"Pousse-cafe!" exploded Camberwell then. "Half way around the world to find this! . . . Pousse-cafe?"

He turned with a human impulse to divide at large the inestimable humor of it; with the same gesture he hung open his well crammed wallet to make payment. And that was the precise moment at which he met the inquiring, brilliant smile of the little gentleman from Macao.

The little gentleman from Macao occupied the adjoining table. It was wholly natural for him to reply with winning and easy politeness. "Pardon," he said. "In your order wrong by the steward? Maybe I can do a service. If you allow me—"

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"You see, sir, the nearest he is, really," he went on. "Colors? My word, yes—ever blooming color. Twenty dif-



"MOTHER?" SHE BREATHED. "SISTERS—YOU 'AVE? AN' YOU CAN SPEAK OF THEM 'ERE?"

mummy-faced Goaboy, who must have had some talent, too, for Camberwell was accurately and sufficiently within the penultimate limit. How he reached the main entrance, how he braved the portals of that famous place where angels certainly fear to tread, he could never have told; but in good time he tipped the grinning doorman a gold piece and bashed his sun-helmet over the celestial head.

message filtered through his dazed senses.

"Come a-way; come a-way—quick! This is danger—danger—danger!"

He rallied to that call and tried to follow her through the crowd as she edged out. But it was not so easy this way—not nearly so easy to leave Li Chwan's as to enter it. Arms were put out to impede them. A muttering rose here and there. But they had reached the edge of the throng, the threshold of another apartment, before a moonfaced Chinaman came bustling up, chattered angrily at the girl and snatched her back toward him.

Camberwell drove a fist to the jaw with a gesture so natural as to be almost unconscious—abolished that Chinaman, sent him tumbling and clawing while the girl slammed a door and leaned there tremble.

"You said—some danger?" queried Camberwell gravely, surprised to find how slowly the words and thoughts came.

"Mother?" she breathed. "Sisters—you 'ave?" An' you can speak of them 'ere?" He nodded, unversed.

"Boy!" she said, with something like a sob. "You—you boy from far away! You have the clean heart—the sweet heart!" She caught him closer. "Do not remember me—never, never, think of me again. But now—will you come kiss me once 'fore you go?"

Well she looked the sort of girl one.

And besides, having asked—He drew the back of his hand across his mouth. Her own was quite close, quite tempting. They were standing by the window. But in the long moment while she clung to him and their lips met, she swung him around, so that she leaned among the curtains herself.

A thundering assault fell upon the door, and at the same time she thrust him away from her so violently that he staggered toward the far corner and almost fell, literally, down the well of the rear staircase that guided him to the street. *

There the second officer met him, wandering in the unprofitable dawn, and picked him up with a great roar of relief.

"Thank God, Mr. Camberwell! sir! I've been looking all about for you. You gave me a fright. I can tell you. I was feared you might be over in here this here gambling hole on the next block. A tough place! The police raided it last night, and it seems they caught a little murdering yellow rat of a Macao Portugeze."

Camberwell stopped him.

"Never mind any of that. I don't care. Tis only thing I want to know is when the ship sails."

"On the tide, sir—half-an-hour."

"Come along then, won't you?"

"Why, sir?" was Davidson's query.

"Have you had enough of this queer port and these queer people?"

"Yes," said the student of local color. "Tis, I've had enough. Let's go!"

As they started along the waterfront he rubbed his lips surreptitiously, as a man will do, on the back of his hand. And when he looked, there was a red smear. Red! That was the final discovery of Camberwell in the far east. Red. The color of life, everywhere the same. Just common red. In a sudden drusque gesture of distress and disillusion, he scrubbed it off with his handkerchief.

* * * For, he thought, and he went on thinking, and he always would think, that the stuff was nothing but rouge.

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U. S. Keeps Heirlooms of Men Dying Abroad

(Continued from Third Page.)

A most intelligent little person—this gentleman from Macao. He nodded. "I understand. If you please wait one second—"

To the stolid Goaboy, still hovering near, he passed a few swift purring phrases. It was a curious detail that he used a Portuguese dialect, which is almost as safe as a secret code, even in the babel of a far eastern town. But nobody could have noticed the order he gave, nor how he gave it; nobody could have suspected him of taking any interest in the visitor. Only, after the fresh drink had been brought—

"You like that?"

"Great!" The stuff looked exactly like liquid topaz, tasted exactly as topaz ought to taste—delicate, keen and pungent. "It's great!" admitted Camberwell, sipping.</p